



Farewell, my mother's son

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THE late former British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, once said: "The legacy of heroes is the memory of a great name and the inheritance of a great example." Last Thursday afternoon, Uganda and Africa lost one of the most memorable names in football.

This afternoon, in our ancestral home in Pece, my family will bury David Otti, the sports hero, and the last-born of my grandfather Abuneri Ogaba. Uncle Otti's funeral comes less than a month after he buried his older brother Alipayo Lwanymoi Oloya (my father), and assumed the traditional role of head for the Oloya family.

Indeed, the public David Otti was a legendary footballer who rose to fame through sheer talent and hard work.

It was as a member of the Cranes team that he represented Uganda at the 1968 African Cup of Nations in Cairo, Egypt. At the time, players who retired from playing football simply faded away to doing something else. Otti did not fade away into the night, instead he became one of the pioneers of professional football in Uganda and on the continent. He brought the same passion for the game that he had as a player into his role as a coach starting in 1973 as a national coach for the Cranes, and moving on to coach many teams to great success including Simba FC, Gor Mahia (Kenya), SC Villa, Mogadishu Municipal (Somalia), APR FC (Rwanda), KCC FC, and Express FC.

Along the way, he showed young football talents what made a great footballer. As a former mentee recalled, "I first met David Otti as an 11-year-old preparing for a game against Kitante Primary School at Nakivubo Stadium which preceded a high profile KCC vs Villa game. The day before I drove home with him and he advised me on what it took to make it in Africa."

Meanwhile, Uganda sports journalist James Opoka recalled meeting David Otti regularly through his brother, the late Peter Okee, another legend of Uganda football and Otti's best friend off the field. He recalled "David, my brother Peter Okee, Denis Obua, Hassan Mutasa, Joseph Masajjage were players of different clubs, enemies so to speak. But David always said they were friends and they stayed friends, and David always led discussions on merits and failures of a game."

Opoka also recalled that after asking so many questions on how to become the best football player, Otti calmly told him that he, Opoka, would make a great sports journalist. "That's what I became, a sports journalist." But for my family, Uncle Otti's national and international fame was just part of who he was out there. At home, he was a very devoted husband to his wife Faith (whom we referred to as "Min Akello", (the mother of Akello) and father to five children—Richard Otti, Juddy Akello Olunga, Leonard Odong, David Ochan, and Jackie Otti. While he led a very public life with so many adoring fans, at home he was a kind father who never raised his voice. With so many relatives visiting from upcountry, Otti's home was a revolving door throughout the 1970s and part of the 1980s.

When I joined Makerere University in 1979, I stayed for a few weeks at Otti's home, and as always he and his wife Faith were welcoming. His advice at the time was very simple— "Work hard and get good

grades." In May 2010, already battling diabetes, Otti's leg was amputated.

But when I met him at my father's burial last month, Otti was upbeat and very happy. He was central in the preparation for his brother's funeral, calling often to see how things were going. After all, he was now responsible for the whole of the Oloya family. At the funeral, he spoke eloquently as head of the family, recalling how his brother Alipayo wanted to stop him from playing football because he felt it was a waste of time. "Once Alipayo understood that this was my passion, then he encouraged me to excel in it," he told the gathered mourners in Pamin-Yai. He could not stand up for a prolonged period so he sat as he spoke. In the days after my father's funeral, I reconnected with my uncle over many conversations. He was so much at peace, so happy to be at home surrounded by family, helping to sort out the many loose ends that his brother Alipayo left behind.

I commented on how relaxed he was conducting business—it was the Uncle we knew, calm, cool-headed and extremely sensitive to everyone. The night before I left Gulu on my way back to Kampala and then to Canada, Uncle Otti who always referred to me as "Wod maa" (my mother's son) instead of my name, said "Wod maa, wot maber ka ii dok ii Canada" (My mother's son, travel safely back to Canada). We gave each other big hugs. It was past midnight on a starry Gulu night. And so this afternoon, under the blazing hot sun, David Otti, one of Uganda and Africa's original football heroes will be laid to rest.

A fan wrote: "Otti deserves to be declared a Hero". Well, he was a hero to many, especially to his wife Faith, children Richard, Juddy, Leonard, David and Jackie, eight grand children and many of his nephews and nieces who knew him from the inside as a very kind soul. Wot maber wod maa, wot maber —Farewell, my mother's son, farewell.

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